

Down, Girl! How to Converse With Your Inner Critic

Let's say that while dreaming about how to boost your business, you come up with a few new ideas. But before you flesh them out, a raspy voice enters your head and says something like, "That is so stupid," or "That will never work, you dummy."

Some folks call this voice the inner critic.

I call it the inner rottweiler: a powerful, merciless predator that knows how to bite into your most vulnerable places and render you helpless.

Ouch.

If you have negative self-talk, you're not alone. One study showed that 80 percent of what goes on in most people's heads is negative.

As a poet, I've had to struggle a lot with my unruly short-haired heckler. Whether I'm writing a poem or promoting my speaking and playshop business, that obstreperous voice tries to insert itself any time I'm on a creative jag.

Although listening too much to the rottweiler can be debilitating, I've found that ignoring it completely can also cause problems. Sometimes, the yapper is right.

Here are some tips that have helped me tame my critical voice so that it's helpful instead of limiting:

- 1) **Acknowledge that the voice is there.** Just because you admit you hear voices in your head doesn't mean you're a schizophrenic. We all have self-talk—both positive and negative. The goal is to encourage our inner cheerleaders and take the nastiness out of the rottweiler. Both voices surface whenever we're insecure. Job #1: Separate the voice from your thoughts. You may want to say to it, "I hear you." Distinguish between the idea itself and any judgment that accompanies it.
- 2) **Dismiss the voice.** At the beginning of the creative process, while you're brainstorming (or as I like to say, *think linking*—more inviting than a brain storm), dismiss the critic as much as possible. It may help to say something out loud, such as "Down, Girl," or "Please be quiet," or, as my friend Jude Janett says, "Thank you for sharing, now shut up." One technique for excluding the critic is to freewrite—never lift your pen from the page for 10-30 minutes. No stopping, no scratching out. Without any stops in the writing flow, there's no place or time for the voice to insert itself. You will improve at this the more you do it. It helps to start with a phrase that directs your freewriting, such as "I'd like to create a product that ..." But once you start writing, let the words take you where they will.
- 3) **Sort through your ideas.** After a freewriting exercise, underline ideas that stand out. Don't throw anything away. Go through them one by one.
- 4) **Write down what the negative voice says.** As you're evaluating, whenever the judgmental voice starts to yawp, make a list of all the statements it says. How would you

- feel if another person whom you respected spoke to you that way? Put down? Hurt? Angry? Defiant? Would you ever speak like that to anyone else? (If yes, how do you think other people respond to you?)
- 5) **Write a response to each negative accusation.** For instance, if your rottweiler said, “That’s so dumb. No one will buy that product,” then write a detailed answer explaining why it is a viable idea (the product fits a certain niche; you’ve been wanting one yourself; etc.)
 - 6) **Evaluate the discussion between the negative voice and your response.** Does the negative voice have any validity? If so, reword the message to be constructive instead of disapproving. For instance, replace “You’re crazy. No one will ever buy that product,” with something like, “That product is too expensive for your market. How can you make it cost less?”
 - 7) **Walk away from your idea.** Though a dog may show its teeth when it first meets someone new, it often calms after being around that new person for a while. It’s the same with an idea. If you’ve written your brainchild down, you can always come back to it later. After a day or a week, you’ll evaluate it more evenly.
 - 8) **Thank your critic.** One of the best ways to disarm a disagreeable person is to think nice thoughts about them and thank them, genuinely, for something. It’s the same with the voice in our head. For instance, we might say to our voice, “You did a great job focusing that idea until it worked.” Like a rottweiler, a negative voice can also be quite friendly at times and will actually warm up to its owner. Good Girl.

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